

# VF - Gravelotte - St. Privat

At 11.30 pm on 2 June the Senior Naval Officer, Dunkirk, gave the simple signal: 'B.E.F. evacuated'. The last tragic phase therefore largely concerns the French.

The weakness of French personnel control in Dunkirk was already apparent in the early hours of 2 June when about 10,000 places were left vacant because men were not brought to the right place at the right time. With German guns now less than 3 miles from the Mole it was essential for Admiral Ramsay to know precisely how many men remained in the bridgehead if all the rearguard was to be saved. French estimates were muddled and unhelpful but seemed to suggest a final total of 30,000; and this was the maximum which the Navy undertook to evacuate provided they reached the embarkation area during darkness.

The rearguard disengaged at 10.30 pm and began an orderly withdrawal to the waiting ships. Then, literally at the eleventh hour, thousands of Frenchmen emerged from hiding places in the town and swarmed towards the ships. As a result, although the Navy fulfilled its commitment, about 40,000 men, including many of the luckless rearguard, fell needlessly into German hands.

The British destroyer *Shikari* was the last ship to escape from Dunkirk: at 3.40 am on Tuesday, 4 June. At 9 am Dunkirk surrendered.

B.J.B.

## Gravelotte and Mars-la-Tour (A\*\*\*)

**Date:** 16 and 18 August 1870.

**Location:** The first action was fought immediately to the east of Mars-la-Tour; the second battlefield lies to the east of Gravelotte on the N. 3 road from Verdun to Metz, and stretches north to St. Privat. 92.

**War and campaign:** Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (see p. 197).

**Object of these actions:** The Germans intended to intercept the French forces falling back from Metz towards Verdun.

**Opposing sides:** (a) General H. von Moltke in command of the 1st and 2nd Armies of the North German Confederation.

(b) Marshal Bazaine commanding the French Army of the Rhine.

**Forces engaged (Gravelotte only):** (a) Germans: 210 battalions; 133 squadrons; 732 guns. Total: 187,000. (b) French: 183 battalions; 104 squadrons; 520 guns. Total: 113,000.

**Casualties:** (a) 5,240 Germans killed, 14,460 wounded, 500 missing. (b) Total losses: 12,800 Frenchmen.

**Result:** The French were thrown back into the fortress of Metz and played no subsequent part in the campaign. An attempt to relieve them led to the battle of Sedan (q.v.).

## Nearby accommodation: Metz.

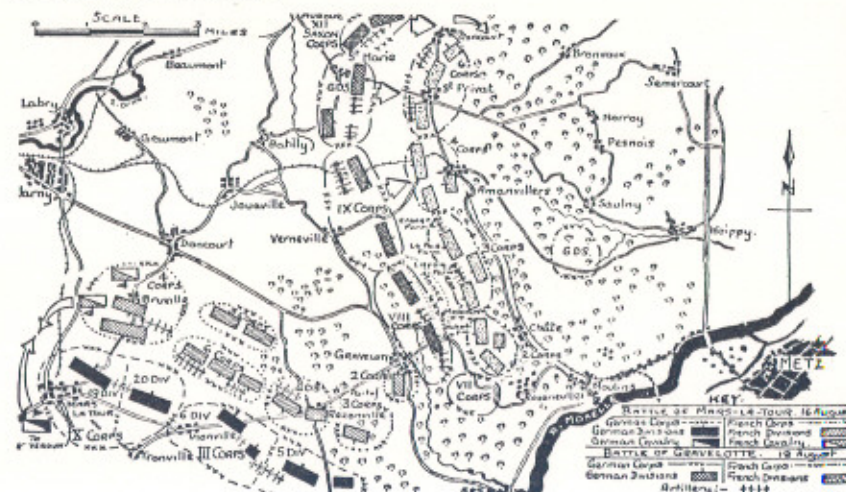
**Suggested reading:** On the Campaign: Howard, M., *The Franco-Prussian War*, London, 1961. On the Battle: Hönig, F., *24 Hours of Moltke's Strategy*, Woolwich, 1895. On the Battle: *Der 18 August 1870* (Historical Section of the German General Staff), Berlin, 1906. Memoirs: Vernoy, J. von V. du, *With the Royal Headquarters in 1870-71*, London, 1897. Memoirs: Patry, L., *La Guerre telle qu'elle est*, Paris, 1907.

At the end of July 1870 the French Army of the Rhine, under the personal command of Napoleon III, had assembled on the frontiers of Alsace and Lorraine in preparation for an invasion of Germany. But the Germans struck first. The French right wing in Alsace under Marshal MacMahon was driven back to the south-west and rallied only when it reached Châlons-sur-Marne, while the left wing under Marshal Bazaine fell back on the fortress of Metz. The Germans followed cautiously, spread over a wide front. Their right wing, advancing towards Metz and Pont-à-Mousson, consisted of the 1st Army under General von Steinmetz and the 2nd Army under Prince Frederick Charles. Steinmetz made contact with the French outposts before Metz on 14 August, but at that very moment Bazaine was beginning to fall back. Napoleon had decided that the position was untenable, and ordered him to retreat from Metz and link up with MacMahon at Châlons.

On learning of the French withdrawal, General von Moltke ordered Steinmetz to mask the fortress of Metz while the 2nd Army crossed the Moselle farther south and advanced westward towards Verdun to intercept their retreat. The Prussians

## GRAVELLOTTE AND MARS-LA-TOUR

16th and 18th August 1870





assumed quite wrongly that Bazaine had made good his escape to Verdun. So when early on 16 August General von Alvensleben's 3rd Corps, on the extreme right wing of the 2nd Army, came in contact with the French 2nd Corps south of Vionville, they thought they had to deal only with a rear-guard. In fact Alvensleben quickly found that he was at grips with the entire Army of the Rhine. He boldly decided to press his attack in order to cut the French escape-route to the west, which he did by capturing and holding the village of Vionville. His task was made easier by Bazaine, whose main concern was to defend his communications with Metz rather than to press on to Verdun, and who therefore concentrated his forces on his left wing round Rezonville and fought a primarily defensive battle. His right wing however, General Ladmirault's 4th Corps, advancing southward on Tronville, might easily have rolled up the Prussian line and cleared the Verdun road but for the opportune arrival of the Prussian 10th Corps on this part of the front. This unit had turned back from its march to the west on hearing the noise of battle, and reached Mars-la-Tour at about 3.30 pm in time to check Ladmirault's advance and strengthen the Prussian hold on the Verdun road. An attempt by German cavalry to strike at Ladmirault's flank north of Mars-la-Tour was met by French cavalry in a huge *mêlée* which must rank as the last major cavalry engagement in western Europe. At nightfall the Prussians were thus able to consolidate their positions, and their object was achieved. Bazaine decided that his forces had been so disorganised that he must for the time being abandon his move on Verdun.

On 17 August therefore the French army withdrew, leaving great quantities of stores and wounded, to a strong position on the crests a few miles west of Metz, facing westward towards its own line of retreat. The left wing rested on the main road from Metz to Gravelotte, above the quarries of Rozerieulles, and the right on the village of St. Privat-la-Montagne, 5 miles to the north. Meanwhile Moltke, on learning the result of the previous day's battle, brought up the full strength of the 2nd Army, with two corps of the 1st, in a huge wheel which brought them by the evening of 17 August to a position between Rezonville and Mars-la-Tour facing due north.

On 18 August both sides were ready for battle. While Steinmetz engaged the French left flank before Gravelotte, Frederick Charles ordered the 2nd Army to 'set out . . . towards the north to find the enemy and fight him'. The Prussians did not realise that the entire French force lay immediately on their right flank. When the 9th Corps opened the battle with an attack on the French centre before Amanvillers, it was on the assumption that they had found an open flank. They were totally repulsed, and no further attack could be developed until the German left wing, the Guard

Corps and the Royal Saxon Corps, could be brought up, wheeling eastward through 90 degrees, to attack, respectively, St. Privat and Roncourt. The Guards attack on St. Privat was brought to a dead stop by the fire of Marshal Canrobert's 6th Corps in the village, in one of the most terrible slaughters of nineteenth-century European warfare. At Roncourt, however, the Saxons had found the French open flank, and at nightfall Canrobert, caught between two fires, abandoned St. Privat and fell back towards Metz.

Meanwhile the French left wing had held firm all day against repeated Prussian assaults. Their front was covered by the deep Mance ravine, and their infantry, ensconced in trenches and stout farmhouses, were unshaken even by heavy and accurate artillery fire. Towards evening Steinmetz's troops, crowded helplessly in the Mance ravine, collapsed in wild panic, and for a while it appeared that the whole German right wing had given way. A more enterprising commander than Bazaine might have seized the chance to counter-attack. A success on this part of the front would not only have reopened the Verdun road, but have cut the German lines of communication, with incalculable consequences. As it was, Bazaine remained passive throughout the battle, leaving his corps commanders to conduct purely defensive operations. His decision that night to fall back again under the guns of the fortress of Metz was prompted, not by the collapse of his right wing at St. Privat, but by a desire to rest and re-equip his force. Some historians have attributed to him more devious political calculations.

The French withdrawal took the Germans by surprise. Their terrible casualties, and the total failure of all their attacks before Gravelotte, had left them still in doubt on the evening of 18 August as to the outcome of the battle. Only on the 19th did it become clear that it had been a victory for them. Tactically it was a limited as well as an expensive one. The German losses were over 20,000 to the French 12,800, and the French army was still intact. But Bazaine was now isolated from the rest of France, and Moltke was able to detach enough forces to invest him in Metz and still have enough strength to advance against the remaining French army forming at Châlons and destroy it at Sedan.

M.E.H.

### *Ivry* (A\*\*)

**Date:** 14 March 1590.

**Location:** Near Ivry-la-Bataille, 10 miles south of Pacy-sur-Eure. 89.

**War and campaign:** The French Wars of Religion (see p. 194).